

Agenda Item 6.1

Cooperation with Other Bodies

Reports by the Secretariat, Parties and
Partners

Information Document 6.1b

**Brief Report of the 2021 meeting of the
Scientific Committee of the International
Whaling Commission**

Action Requested

Take note

Submitted by

OceanCare

Brief Report of the 2021 meeting of the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission.

The 2021 meeting of the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (SC) was held 27 April to 14 May 2021. Five hundred and fifty participants from 36 countries attended.

The SC met virtually, and its full report and annexes are available on the IWC website here: <https://iwc.int/scientific-committee>

Items of particular interest to this meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee included:

1. Baltic Proper Harbour Porpoise

In 2020, the SC had re-iterated its serious concern for the critically endangered harbour porpoise population of the Baltic Proper and again recommended, as a matter of urgency, that all countries adjoining the Baltic Proper immediately act to eliminate bycatch of the Baltic porpoise (Recommendation SC2097). At this latest meeting, the SC reviewed various submissions including Carlén *et al.* (2021), in which the authors contend conservation measures are failing and conclude that bycatch is the most immediate threat for Europe's harbour porpoise populations. There are concerns for the species in the Baltic Proper, Black Sea, Mediterranean Seas and on the Iberian coasts. The Baltic Proper porpoise is Critically Endangered, and the SC has repeatedly called for action to ensure its survival.

SC/68C/HIM/04 reported on recent developments in the USA that show that harbour porpoise populations can recover if bycatch is properly addressed. In particular, Forney *et al.* (2020) demonstrate how reductions or bans of gillnet and trammel fishing effort in the Morro Bay, Monterey Bay, and San-Francisco Russian River Regions of California have all been linked to increases in local harbour porpoise populations. Hence, mitigation in the form of removal of gillnets from an area can be highly effective.

In 2020, the SC had requested the IWC Executive Secretary to write to all the Baltic harbour porpoise range states informing them of the Committee's concerns (Recommendation: SC20102). Replies were received from Denmark and Germany.

Further to its review of submissions, the SC Committee noted that it has repeatedly stated its serious concern for the critically endangered harbour porpoise population of the Baltic Proper (e.g. IWC, 2020c, p.46) and made the following recommendations.

"The Committee:

- (1) reiterates its previous recommendation (SC2097) that, as a matter of urgency, that all Baltic Sea range states immediately act to eliminate bycatch of the Baltic Proper porpoise;*
- (2) urges all Baltic Sea range states to heed the recent advice from ICES and implement long-term bycatch mitigation measures accordingly until population recovery is achieved;*
- (3) encourages countries to make full assessment of any potential interactions between pingers and military sonars, and offers its advice (noting that an intersessional group of the Scientific Committee has been established to facilitate this);*
- (4) encourages further research into stranded and/or bycaught porpoises to investigate all factors negatively impacting the population, including chemical and noise pollution and prey depletion;*
- (5) encourages again the Baltic Sea range states to propose the Baltic Proper porpoise population for listing on CMS Appendix 1 at the earliest opportunity and calls on CMS Parties to support this process;*
- (6) encourages all stakeholders to work expeditiously to increase public awareness of harbour porpoises and the challenges to their conservation; and*
- (7) requests the IWC Executive Secretary to write to all the range states and to the EU Commission informing them of the Committee's ongoing concerns and recommendations."*

2. *Lagenorhynchus species*

The SC received SC/68C/SM/15 which described planned work to evaluate population structure, distribution, demography, and disease status of the two endemic North Atlantic *Lagenorhynchus* species (*L. acutus* and *L.*

albirostris). Both species are generally considered to be data deficient and in 1996 the Committee called for a global review.

3. Beaked Whales

SC/68C/E/02 reported a summary of the findings of the intersessional working group (IWG) of ASCOBANS (Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas). The IWG was established to bring together experts to summarise information about an apparent increase in beaked whale strandings that had occurred in the UK, Ireland, Iceland, the Faroes and elsewhere in the region, to discuss potential reasons for the strandings.

“Beaked whale strandings data from the NE Atlantic region (1990-2020) show a high and potentially growing incidence of strandings (978 reported over this period), with several Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) recorded over this period. The eastern North Atlantic has become a global hotspot for beaked whale UMEs, with the largest ever Cuvier’s beaked whale stranding occurring in 2018, and such UME’s appear to be increasing in both magnitude and frequency. It was noted that there is a clear need to improve how these events are investigated and expand the scope of investigation. It was also noted that stranding networks play a crucial role and these should be further supported and developed. The Committee was asked to review the report recommendations on monitoring and mitigation, and for endorsement, as appropriate. The Committee noted the data deficiency for beaked whale species, and highlighted the importance of the suite of recommendations in the report.”

In discussion, the Committee also noted the difficulty in obtaining data regarding noise-producing activities, as well as the need for a consistent stranding response protocol that would allow researchers to better document beaked whale mortalities

The SC concluded:

*“Recalling Resolution 2018-04, and the Commission's objective to facilitate mitigation of the adverse effects of underwater noise on cetaceans, the Committee welcomes the report from the intersessional working group (IWG) of ASCOBANS and **endorses** its recommendations. The Committee recognises the impacts of anthropogenic underwater noise on beaked whales and other cetacean species and **encourages** the communication and implementation of the ASCOBANS IWG recommendations by all relevant stakeholders. In addition, the Committee **recommends** the development of harmonised response protocols for beaked whale strandings to ensure that the necessary datasets (e.g. pathology, meteorology prior to the stranding, oceanography, acoustic monitoring, and any information on use of high intensity sound sources) can be rapidly assembled to assist with the identification of the time, location and cause of the mortality event. Identifying which data are required for such an investigation will also highlight data collection gaps which could be prioritised to ensure such data are available when needed. The Committee further **recommends** improved data sharing between countries to better identify and investigate mortality events. Further work on beaked whales will be progressed through an intersessional group to be established in cooperation with SM.”*

4. IWC’s Bycatch Mitigation Initiative

A report on the progress of the IWC Bycatch Mitigation Initiative was provided by its coordinator (SC/68C/HIM/24).

Carlén, I., Nunny, L. and Simmonds, M.P. 2021. Out of sight, out of mind: How conservation is failing European porpoises. *Front. Mar. Sci.* 8: 617478. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.617478>].

Forney, K., Moore, J., Barlow, J., Carretta, J. and Benson, S. 2020. A multidecadal Bayesian trend analysis of harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) populations off California relative to past fishery bycatch. *Mar. Mamm. Sci.* 37(2). [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/mms.12764>].